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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000687

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/IR AND SCA/CEN

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TAGS: [IR](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: IRAN ELECTIONS: FOR THESE MASHHAD TRUCKERS, IT'S
"AHMADINEJAD, ENSHALLAH"

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Richard Miles.
Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) In conversations with Iran Watcher near the Turkmenistan/Uzbekistan border last week, a dozen or so Iranian truckers, most coming from the northern city of Mashhad, voiced strong and nearly unanimous support for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran's upcoming presidential election.

We spoke with drivers at several locations near Ferab, including at truck stops and cafes, as well as from a line of trucks waiting to cross into Uzbekistan.

"THE REGIME LIKES AHMADINEJAD"

¶2. (C) Khodaberdi, a friendly ethnic Turkmen driver from the northern province of Golestan who was traveling with his son, did not express support for any one candidate, but predicted with certainty that Ahmadinejad would be re-elected. "He has the most supporters," he said, "People think he's best for the country now, but most importantly, the regime likes him. They'll put him back in office." He added that, in his view, the American and Iranian people have "no problems" and "very friendly" feelings towards each other, but that rapprochement between the two governments may take time: "America has its agenda, and Iran, too, has an agenda," he opined. Like everyone we encountered, he insisted on serving us a cold drink from his truck's cooler. He noted that President Obama is well-liked in Iran, and is "much better than his predecessor," he said, whom he characterized as too "jangju" (bellicose).

¶3. (C) A couple of Mashhad drivers eating lunch next to their rigs near the border beckoned us to join them. They had a more serious demeanor, and answered unequivocally when we asked who they support. "It will be Ahmadinejad enshallah. He has helped people all over the country, especially in rural areas," one said. "Did you know that he has given stipends to every Iranian? He has given out eighty dollars to every person. It comes from our oil money. This is why everyone supports him." They also noted that "so far," Iranians have a positive view of President Obama, again invoking the term "jangju" to describe President Bush.

¶4. (C) At a truck stop and guest house frequented exclusively by Iranians near Turkmenabad on the road to Mary, we spoke to a group of drivers gathered in one room to rest before continuing the drive to Mazar Sharif in Afghanistan. They were all from Mashhad, and explained that drivers from that area prefer to take the delivery routes to northern Afghanistan given their proximity to Turkmenistan, which they can transit relatively easy to reach their destination. In the room, several men were lounging on beds watching an Indian film dubbed in Persian, one was praying, and others sat around a plastic table (where a large, empty "Baltica 3" beer bottle also sat) drinking tea.

¶5. (C) Ali, in his late thirties, with a piercing gaze and wearing an expensive-looking gold watch, said that "without doubt" Ahmadinejad will be re-elected. "He is the best man for Iran and has proved that during the last four years." Mohammad, a pleasant, rotund man with a wife and two daughters back in Mashhad, agreed, saying, "Mousavi might also be fine, but Ahmadinejad has proven himself and has the experience of one term behind him. There is no reason to vote for anyone else." When asked about the United States, Ali said, "Things should be much improved for Iran under President Obama. Iranians question why America got involved in two wars and caused so much destruction in Iraq and Afghanistan." He spoke in detail about U.S. military action in both countries in a manner that was chronologically precise, demonstrating that he was well-informed on international affairs. He went on, however, to describe the Taliban as "illiterate" and "savages." He noted that on his travels to Afghanistan, people there had told him of their disappointment with America, which had "promised to help the

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people and rebuild the country if they got rid of the Taliban." Mohammad also mentioned Iranians' displeasure with America's "blind support" for Israel. "If an American or an Israeli is killed anywhere in the world," he said, "America protests angrily, and yet when a child is killed in Gaza or the West Bank, they don't seem to care."

¶6. (C) When the discussions turned to movies (Iran Watcher mentioned her liking for Iranian films), a man lounging on one of the beds looked up and said, "America makes the best movies in the world, especially the ones with Arnold Schwarzenegger." Another very good movie, he said, is "'Mohammad, Prophet of God', with Anthony Quinn" (referring to Moustapha Akkad's 1976 film "The Message"). Several others in the room nodded, "Yes, that was a great movie," they agreed.

AMERICA AND IRAN: "A QUARREL BETWEEN TWO BROTHERS"

¶7. (C) In the evening, after the crossing had closed, we spoke at length to Mustafa, a driver in his early fifties with a wide smile who resides in Mashhad with his wife and three children. He was on his way to Tajikistan to deliver a load of Iranian paper products. Have driven loads from Iran to Central Asia since the fall of the USSR, he has learned a fair amount of Russian to get by during his travels. Mustafa went about an elaborate process of preparing tea for us, sweetened with crystallized sugar beets, which involved heating the water on a small propane stove and achieving the perfect balance between brewed tea and hot water. His simple demeanor, however, belied a rather philosophic outlook on his country and its relations with the world. "Everyone is always talking about the importance of freedom for Iran," he said, "but is freedom really just a question of being able to drink alcohol or not to wear the hijab? In many ways, the Islamic Republic has been a good thing for Iran. Before the revolution, we were forever dominated by either the United States or Britain. Look at us now. We are self-sufficient, and our industries are very advanced. Freedom is about being

able to move forward on your own two feet."

18. (C) Mustafa went on to expand on the notion of "personal security" as integral to freedom. "America and Europe both sound like wonderful, modern societies," he said, "but there is so much crime. Everyday, I read about people in America who killed someone because they have lost everything in the financial crisis. In Mashhad, where my daughter goes to university, I feel secure because I know that she can go to and from school in safety -- no one will hurt her." He said that it is "likely" that Ahmadinejad will be re-elected. "Nevertheless," he said, "Moussavi also has a chance." On the subject of rapprochement, he believes that Obama and the next Iranian president will manage to "work things out." "It's just like between two brothers -- even they sometimes quarrel, don't they?" Before we left, he insisted on serving us some homemade liquor he had stashed in his cooler, but it was getting late and we needed to move on.

19. (C) COMMENT: There was resounding support for Ahmadinejad among this group of Iranians, which is not particularly surprising in view of their socioeconomic backgrounds and what we know about Ahmadinejad's followers in general. As our conversations also showed, it would be a mistake to assume that any Iranian, including a truck driver, is not well-informed about U.S. foreign policy or the history of its relations with Iran. END COMMENT.
MILES